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Thoughts from the Corner

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I wrote this reflection for myself over the course of a few evenings in a hotel room in New York City in late January 2020. At that time, I was on sabbatical, and, thanks to a grant from the New York Public Library, I was in town to examine manuscripts at the NYPL and the J. P. Morgan Museum & and Library. (Ironically enough, I have for the last few years been researching illuminated Apocalypses of the later Middle Ages.) It was while in New York that I learned that COVID-19 had made landfall in the United States, the first cases recorded in the Pacific Northwest, where I live. That period in New York attains a glow as the last time I worked in a library or a coffeeshop, the last time I was on a plane or a train, the last time I visited friends in a restaurant, the last time I attended a church service—all against a backdrop of more and more ominous news. Returning home, I, like so many, went into fluctuating degrees of lockdown, in our case with extra care given that my partner is immune-compromised. Reading now my musing on Townsend’s novel, I am struck by both the freedom it assumes—freedom to travel, to browse shelves in bookstores—and by the acceleration of decline due catastrophic plagues.

I also recognize that the real academic novels of the twenty-first century are Geoff Cebula’s *Adjunct* (2017) and the many examples of quit-lit. It is a privilege to be in a position of security from which to lament the erosion of tenure and the liberal arts college. Because this reflection is a personal time capsule, however, I have left it as is, revealing of my own blind spots.

Forget Kingsley Amis and David Lodge -- Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote the academic novel of the twenty-first century, even if it is set in the fourteenth.
Recently reissued, *The Corner That Held Them* (1948; New York Review of Books, 2019), chronicles life in a Norfolk convent, from its impecunious founding to just after 1381’s Great Revolt. Chronicles, indeed: as several reviewers have remarked, the novel does not focus upon characters so much as events, with chapters segmented by dates and an unflinching narrator who records spiritual crises and lice with the same degree of detachment; the church’s spire has more presence than most of the nuns, and the novel does not conclude so much as stop, the anonymous chronicler perhaps setting down pen due to dimming eyesight or poor health such as ground the sisters to oblivion.

I came to the book with a mixture of curiosity and obligation. As a medievalist whose research corresponds with this period, I felt Warner’s novel was required reading, if only to fend off questions from those friends who pay attention to displays in independent bookstores. More compelling was its East Anglian setting. After more than a decade of long-distance walking them, I cherish the bleak fens, those water-logged

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**Figure 1** Norfolk Coast Path near Cley and Blakeney, 2012. Photo: author.
plains in which, prior to sixteenth-century Dutch engineering, Ely, like Warner’s Oby, was an island. I welcomed another fens book to place beside my copies of *The Nine Tailors* and *Waterland*.

What I was not expecting, however, was my growing alarm as I turned the pages, for Oby’s Benedictine convent of Our Lady and St. Leonard’s reads as a bleak allegory for the current state of the liberal arts college.

Many of the parallels are obvious. Liturgical time punctuates the year with different seasons (Lent, Easter, finals, graduation) yet blankets these rhythms with soothing monotony, only the occasional aberration being worthy of note (in 1345 a plague of caterpillars, in 2015 winds damaged the footbridge to the dorms). The election of a new Prioress, like the appointment of a new dean, brings hope of fresh direction, until the combination of financial restraints and institutional lethargy molds even the most promising into mediocrity. As can happen between faculty and staff, relations between the nuns and the manor workers occasionally are tense: laborers grumble that

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**Figure 2** Salt marsh near Brancaster Straithe, Norfolk Coast Path. 2012. Photo: author.
they do the real work of the place when it comes to husbandry and resent the sense of bewildered entitlement cloaking the nuns—but of course there would be no manor to support laborers with no convent, for before the nuns arrived the land was grossly neglected, and ostensibly the nuns are called to a different sort of work. The convent is a space with the illusion of self-governance, although real decision-making rests beyond its walls with the bishop/trustees and the occasional patron. Nuns rotate convent duties (infirmary, scullery, sacristan) much as faculty circulate in a never-ending musical chairs of committee assignments. There is a probationary period before a novice takes her vow, but once she does, the sister has tenure, with all of its secure sameness.

Academic tenure is a treasured gift, especially in the gig economy, and ideally grants the freedom to speak with no fear of consequences from vested interests. Yet its holders
are also human. No matter how much genuine affection for one’s colleagues, who has not endured a faculty meeting that elicited feelings akin to Prioress Alicia’s melancholy?

A sensation of unmitigable loneliness crushed her spirit. She lived with these women and she would end her days among them; yet she understood them no better than they understood her. There can hardly be intimacy in the cloister: before intimacy can be engendered there must be freedom, the option to approach or to move away. She stared at their faces, so familiar and undecipherable. They are like a tray of buns, she thought. (43)

When you don’t get tenure, they slam the door in your face. When you do, they slam the door behind you. St. Leonard is, after all, the patron saint of prisoners.

Like many institutions, Oby’s convent was founded with more ambition than resources by someone who doesn’t fully understand what exactly is needed to cultivate otium. The chapel is a converted cow shed, the chapterhouse a dovecote whose former occupants won’t all vacate, and the manor cannot provide sufficient stores. Perversely,
**Figure 5** The corner, All Saints, Edingthorpe, 2019. Photo: author.
like interest, these shabby, straightened beginnings compound so that the convent remains in perpetual insolvency. Without a proper endowment, and with buildings done on the cheap that end up costing much to maintain, St. Leonard’s is consigned to the world more than to heaven. Instead of cultivating the spiritual life of the sisters in their charge, prioresses seek to monetize them, just as faculty were recently asked in a survey how we might contribute to the college’s revenue stream beyond our teaching. Perhaps selling some of Dame Alice’s marzipan, or having Dame Cecily illuminate a psalter for a rich patron? When Dame Salome clandestinely departs as a Holy Land
pilgrim, one wonders if a more desperate Prioress could have foreseen capitalizing upon that for alumni fundraising tours.

This persistent fretting about money—turning what should be a house of Marys into ill-adapted Marthas—is not born from greed so much as survival. Society has placed the nuns in this situation more than their own wants or ineptitude. The convent may seem like a parasitical institution, especially to modern secular eyes, but it was created by a world that valued a work it could accomplish only by being separate: Our Lady and St. Leonard’s is in a sense an enormous chantry, its occupants offering atonement for the souls of the feckless founder and his adulterous wife. The community relies on the nuns’ charitable works to sustain the poor. In lean times there are grumblings of the nuns’ rumored laxness, but everyone takes pleasure in a well-sung service and in the distinction their spire conveys. The church, like college education, is a source of power, perpetuating the elite’s hold, and yet it is also one of the few institutions in this society that allows for social mobility. The Bishop was a peasant, as are some of the nuns of Oby, now resident with descendants of their Norman

Figure 7 St. Clare, Rood Screen (15th century), St. John the Baptist’s Head, Trimingham, 2019. Photo: author.
overlords. It is a paradox that society wants to claim pride of ownership in this institution enshrining the loftiness of human potential while insisting it requires too much to survive, that the convent should be condemned for both its reach and its dependence.

What makes Warner’s novel feel like an authentic portrait of the current college—even if unintended—is that it is not about the exceptional but the quotidian. Other academic novels revel in caricatures of eccentrics coddled in academe’s walls and delight in skewering sybaritic excess and arcane absurdity. But the free-wheeling days of glamorous conference hopping have been curtailed (if, in the humanities at least, it were ever possible except for those holding appointments at a handful of well-endowed research universities). As with so many estate satires, the grotesque set up for abuse shares little with the many more humble exemplars, plodding along with their unending piles of prayers and ungraded essays. Most of Warner’s nuns are nearly indistinguishable as so many share the same modest wants and petty complaints. Also absent in The Corner That Held Them is the eros of the quest. No romanticized portrait of frenzied discovery or dazzling scholastic feats, such as in A. S. Byatt’s Possession or Nabokov’s Palefire, which in different ways celebrate the intoxication of scholarship. Instead, we are repeatedly given glimpses of artistic and intellectual flight curtailed. Dame Cecily’s rheumy eyes truncate her career as a gifted illuminator. The vernacular masterpiece The Lay of Marmillion, urgently pressed upon the convent’s priest by the poet’s widow in hopes that he would know best how to disseminate it, languishes unappreciated until he is too senile to have his enthusiasm credited. Dame Alicia, the nun most prone to “dream of beauty,” seems perpetually doomed to have her plans thwarted: her capital improvement born from a vow to St. Leonard—a spire to dignify their humble church and imbue the soggy landscape with some sublimity—becomes a struggle against external funding woes and internal resentments, such that all pleasure drains from its long-overdue completion; her second masterpiece, her Trinity Cope, a work of exceptional Opus Anglicanum, is left unfinished by her death and then stolen. Even Dame Lilias’s vision of St. Leonard is born from pain, a taunting blow from another sister.

Instead, we are given the uneasy alliance of inside and outside, of routine substituting for spiritual nourishment. All of this, while dreary, can limp along, plastering over the gap between the ideal and the real, until the world outside spirals off kilter. A series of environmental imbalances—flooding, famine—crescendos with pandemic, the Black Death. These natural calamities initiate further upheaval, as depopulation breaks down, at least temporarily, the social conventions that have allowed for gross economic inequality. Anger unleashes violence, and the gifts of otium are consumed in the flames—at times literally.
One of the few moments of transcendence is when the bishop’s clerk Henry Yellowlees stops at a leperhouse, where its chaplain invites him to sing from a new manuscript of Machaut. After Henry seems to get the hang of this strange musical setting, the chaplain inquires if he would mind if they were joined by one of the lepers who is a trained singer, thus allowing them to perform a piece requiring more voices. Henry acquiesces, and

If Triste loysir had seemed a foretaste of paradise, the Kyrie was paradise itself. This was how the blessed might sing, singing in a duple measure that ran as nimbly on its four feet as a weasel running through a meadow, with each voice in turn enkindling the others, so that the music flowed on and was continually renewed. And as paradise is made for man, this music seemed made for man’s singing; not for edification, or the working-out of an argument, or the display of skill, but only for ease and pleasure, as in paradise where the abolition of sin begets a pagan carelessness, where the certainty of Christ’s countenance frees men’s souls from the obligation of Christian behaviour, the creaking counterpoint of God’s law and man’s obedience. (262)
The experience haunts Henry’s reverie long after their voices are silent. A leperhouse is a charnel, its inmates in a liminal space of living death, “But out came the music as the kingfisher flashes from its nest of stinking fishbones.” Yet not for long: on Henry’s return, he finds the house a pile of smoking rubble, from which he excavates his leprous song partner. The dead were roused by the same unrest as the living, and the lepers rebelled, burning the Machaut and murdering the chaplain, forcibly choked on a bone stuffed down his throat.

And yet grief is checked by the dispassionate narrator’s report of the lepers’ complaints, their suspicions that money that should have gone towards improving their meals was squandered on music. Exigency extinguishes transcendence. This is what makes The Corner that Held Them most devastating: unremitting minor buffets and forced compromises erode the ideal that there can be space for contemplation and creation, such that it is unable to weather the tempests long overdue. Warner’s emphasis upon forces, rather than characters, underscores how insignificant we are.

Figure 9 St. Barbara and St. Paul (14th century), detail of the dado of the rood screen donated by John Miller (d. 1488) and wife Clarice, All Saints, Thornham, 2009. Photo: author.
The small battles that weary us—vanity, budget shortfall, niggling worry—are inescapable, rendering us weak when real crisis comes. We do not know how to hold on to grace as the world burns. In a moment of resignation, Prioress Alicia recognizes her stuck-ness:

And here am I, she thought, fixed in the religious life like a candle on a spike. I consume, I burn away, always lighting the same corner, always beleaguered by the same shadows; and in the end I shall burn out and another candle will be fixed in my stead. (103)

We never learn what happened to Oby’s convent after 1382, but in a best-case scenario it had another 150 years until it was suppressed in the Dissolution as part of Henry VIII’s break from the church of Rome. Sometimes, that seems like better odds than ours. I’m just praying another candle will be stuck in my place when I retire. 😭